

# web 2.0

by Julie Sturgeon

## Five Don'ts of Classroom Blogging

Avoiding these pitfalls will help students get the full benefits of online journaling.

### NO ONE NEEDS TO SELL BROCK DUBBELS

on the use of blogging as a part of curriculum. Dubbels, an engineering teacher at **Washburn High School** in Minneapolis has seen firsthand that his students perform better when they know their peers will be reviewing their work as opposed to merely having to face the judgment of their teacher.

But ironically, in Dubbels' experience, the voice that blogging gives to students is what presents the most potential trouble. Kids will always push the line on what they say to each other, and what they link to, and educators can find themselves on the defensive.

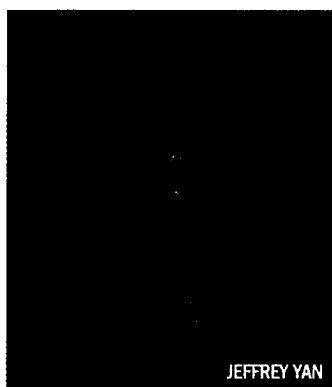
"I call it *technicaleducaphobia*," says Dubbels, a former English teacher and a doctoral candidate in reading and compre-

hension at K-12 schools throughout Georgia. She keeps her own "Edublog" (<http://anne.teaches.me>), as she named it, where she discusses the use of blogs in education and provides her own blogging projects.

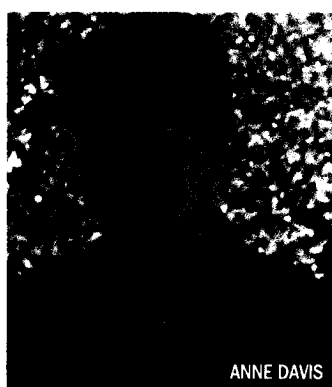
Davis advises teachers to have their students sign off on a code of conduct for blogging that covers areas such as bullying, slander, and foul language. In Davis' classrooms, students who violate the rules lose their internet privileges. She also says it's a good idea for a teacher to send a note to parents describing the specific blogging project and to get an adult signature granting permission. She suggests teachers search for interesting educational blogs, and then e-mail the educators behind them for advice.



BROCK DUBBELS



JEFFREY YAN



ANNE DAVIS

hension at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches a course called Video Games as Learning Tools. "Teachers have often been placed in situations where they don't have access to equipment that will monitor these things, or they don't consider the larger picture and oftentimes get into trouble. These become cautionary tales, and other teachers decide, 'Well, I'm not going to do that.' But the potential trouble is worth the rewards. You just have to plan around the potential problems." Start by sidestepping these common pitfalls.

**1. DON'T just dive in.** "If you put kids on blogs without setting up your guidelines and objectives, I can guarantee you will have a lot of problems," warns Anne Davis, an information systems training specialist at Georgia State University. As a component of the instructional technology outreach she provides to K-12 teachers and schools, she teaches

blogging at K-12 schools throughout Georgia. She keeps her own "Edublog" (<http://anne.teaches.me>), as she named it, where she discusses the use of blogs in education and provides her own blogging projects.

upload a post, and what makes a good blog and comment. "The important thing is not to just jump in and blog, but spend the time letting students see samples, understand guidelines, and anticipate blogging and what it can mean to their learning," she says. "The time you spend will pay off for you double when you get down to it, because they want to blog well."

"Our kids aren't digital natives," Davis adds, challenging one of cyberspace's most oft-repeated axioms. "They are just kids who grew up with a lot of digital media. They aren't natural bloggers."

**2) DON'T confuse blogging with social networking.** MySpace, Facebook, and other social networking tools are just that—social networking platforms. However, a genuine educational blog is not about socializing, but about students helping each other get through coursework. ▶

That's why Davis says savvy teachers work to keep the focus of blogging on academic collaboration, helping students frame thought-provoking questions at the end of their blog entries that will invite valuable comments.

"This is a different writing space than students are accustomed to," Davis says. For that reason, she doesn't grade on the quality of posts, but rather on whether students completed the assignments in a serious manner.

Dubbels says he divides his classes into sections, asking one group to write entries while the other group comments on those remarks.

**3. DON'T leap at the freebies.** Blogger.com and TypePad.com may not cost a cent to use, but these platforms do not offer the structure a school district needs, says Jeffrey Yan, CEO of e-portfolio developer Digication ([www.digication.com](http://www.digication.com)). A professor in the education department at the Rhode Island School of Design, Yan says his expertise is the integration of technology into the classroom, and he makes extensive use of blogging in his teaching.

Yan says that free sites are riddled with advertisements that are outside educators' control. And because there is no way to build a cyber-fence around a particular classroom project, students have access to the entire blogging world—and vice versa. That's too much transparency for Yan's liking.

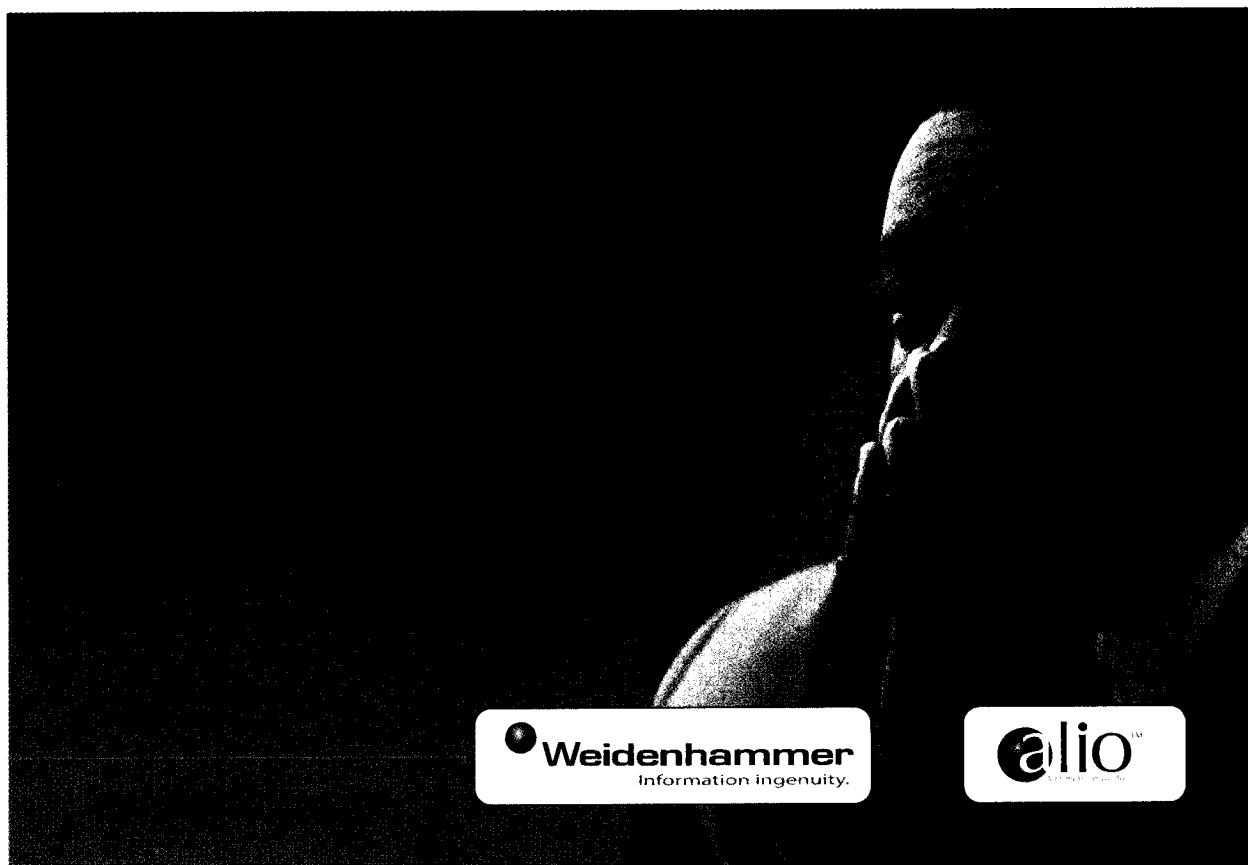
## AND ONE DO


**DO recognize what blogging** can do for your students, says high school engineering instructor Brock Dubbels, who uses blogging extensively in his teaching. And that is to help them become better writers. "Writing nonfiction is one of the most difficult things to do for students," Dubbels says. "They say it's boring." Blogging engages students in creating short bits of writing, which Dubbels says they can then piece together and develop into larger pieces. "Blogs are great for transitioning from paragraphs to essays."


Dubbels recognizes there's still a need to teach standard forms of composition, but says conventional essay writing can't interest students in writing the way blogging does.

"What I Did Last Summer," "My Favorite Color"—these don't offer the multimedia experience that blogging can," he says. "Students are really interested in working with images, video, and music on the web. Blogging allows that."

"We are writing in a way that traditional writing doesn't match up. Blogging is more about exploration, discovery, creation, and the idea that students can do things that are immediately gratifying."



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Open source software is another inexpensive route, but Yan doesn't find the current offerings particularly user-friendly. "Open source software is typically written by very technical people who are very good at getting the computer science part of it right," he says. "However, I don't see them using the psychology, the user interface—and most of education's end users don't have any sort of technical background at all."

Davis likes Class Blogmeister ([www.classblogmeister.com](http://www.classblogmeister.com)). "It's very simple, with just seven templates—but it gives the teacher a lot of control," she says, noting that Blogmeister filters each student entry through the teacher before publication.

**4. DON'T force a sequential style.** Blogs are a great tool to link to a *Washington Post* article and give your opinion today, and tomorrow talk about a totally different topic in *The Wall Street Journal*. And Yan says they offer unique "educational value to document a project over time." But such chronological presentation doesn't always best serve the blogger, he says. Suppose a student wants to post poetry that earned an award in August. By October, that may still be his most prized accomplishment, but it's buried deep in the blog structure.

Yan says that structuring entries by topic rather than by time helps readers to make more sense of a blog. "You have to

map out what you want to teach with a blog. Otherwise, you spend a lot of energy developing a product that may not have the maximum impact it could have. And that is a waste of opportunity because often you have only one chance to present it to students before they build a culture around it that you can't break."

**5. DON'T leave the blogging to the students.** Davis once coached a teacher who established her own blog to solicit feedback on how her school could make learning more attractive for students. Eventually, the teacher blogged about positive character traits, giving examples of students she'd seen exhibiting them that week. Response was tremendous, as students not only commented at her site, but strived to find their names in print as well.

"A blog becomes a community," Davis says. "You get to know students in ways that they won't reveal otherwise. A quiet child will give you her opinion [in a blog]."

"The sky's the limit—it's a new literacy. Reading a blog online and learning how the hyperlinks and the comments work require skills that if we don't teach them, then who will?" **THE**

*Julie Sturgeon is a freelance writer based in Indianapolis.*



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## BYTESIZE

Teacher Anne Davis uses a webquest—a learning activity in which students draw on web-based information—to introduce elementary school students to blogging. You can find Davis' webquest at [www.webquest.org/questgarden/lessons/34308060831081120](http://www.webquest.org/questgarden/lessons/34308060831081120).